

Ottawa's bridge for bureaucrats

National Post (f/k/a The Financial Post) (Canada)

January 4, 2022 Tuesday

National Edition

Copyright 2022 National Post All Rights Reserved

Section: ISSUES; Pg. A10

Length: 1149 words

Byline: Kelly Mcparland, National Post

Body

As someone who has never experienced the privilege of living and working full-time in Ottawa, I was surprised to discover the nation's capital is in the throes of considering an infrastructure project that is regressive, short-sighted, ill-advised, environmentally damaging and violates all that is holy about the modern gospel of climate change.

The only thing that didn't surprise me was that it was ridiculously expensive and has been under discussion for years - subject to investigation after investigation - with no discernible progress. Now that's the Ottawa we know and endure.

The project in question involves the construction of a bridge over the Ottawa River. It would be the sixth bridge, and is supposedly required because several of the others are either aging or approaching their maximum capacity to carry traffic between Ottawa and Gatineau. Ottawa is a growing region, thanks to the fact the federal government never stops expanding or spending, and has a policy of dividing its offices and jobs between either side of the river. This actively encourages commuting, vehicle traffic, congestion, emissions and a host of other sins, and also makes for a lot of trucks trundling through Ottawa's centre, which really annoys civil servants as they hurry home at the end of their shifts.

Since the bridges cross a provincial border they come under federal authority, unlike the highway the Ontario government is trying to build elsewhere in the province to reduce traffic on Highway 401 - the world's busiest - so it bypasses clogged Toronto and reduces some of the suffocating truck traffic that runs through the country's most populated region. The Ontario route, christened Highway 413, has come under all-out attack by the full resources of the highway wing of the environmental campaign, with Premier Doug Ford denounced in no uncertain terms by activists, mayors, owners of pleasant rural homes, disapproving journalists and everyone who knows that roads are bad things for everyone but the people who have to use them.

So far there has been no such abuse heaped on federal officials, some of whom presumably would be using the new bridge. The Trudeau government pledged to build the structure in its 2019 budget without suffering wholesale condemnation of the sort aimed at Ford, and reinforced its intentions in postelection mandate letters sent out to cabinet members. Not everyone is on board with the scheme: Ottawa Mayor Jim Watson has persistently argued the plan would just leave vehicles stuck on a busy bridge instead of a busy highway and says the money could be better spent elsewhere. Former Gatineau mayor Maxime Pedneaud-Jobin was also opposed, until he was succeeded in November by Mayor France Bélisle, a former head of Tourisme Outaouais and a former executive at Radio-Canada, who is in favour.

Of course, the official line on commuting and vehicular traffic is that they should be discouraged at every opportunity. People should take transit wherever possible. Where it's not possible, it should be built. Even better would be construction of "living cities" with neighbourhoods in which people can shop, work and play within walking

distance of their homes. "Sprawl" - i.e. new neighbourhoods outside the confined spaces of existing boundaries - is actively discouraged. "In-fill" - i.e. squeezing buildings onto smaller patches of available land - is favoured. "Building up," as in highrise condos or apartments, is preferred to "building out" into places that require people to use their car on a regular basis.

It's difficult to discern how any of these imperatives would be met by building a bridge making it easier for people on one side of the Ottawa River to drive to the other. Nonetheless, this being Ottawa, plenty of money is being spent examining, assessing, investigating and rehashing the case. A National Capital Commission study in 2008 settled on a route via Kettle Island, a bit of empty land in the middle of the river. A second study followed in 2013, with Kettle Island once again the technical choice.

The NCC has now "refreshed" the 2013 report, this time identifying three potential routes, of which Kettle Island, at \$1.8 billion, is the cheapest and likely to attract the most traffic. Two other alternatives would be at least \$300 million more expensive.

The city also looked into building a tunnel in 2016, which would be even more costly.

Radio-Canada reported in September that only a 34-page portion of the NCC's "refreshment" was made public. A much larger, 150-page examination costing \$1.5 million was withheld "for internal use." It doesn't say why. In any case, Kettle Island once again emerged as the most efficient and cost-effective choice, the main drawback being its impact on local neighbourhoods.

Environmental impacts are deemed "manageable," which is what advocates of projects with obvious eco-issues always say. Traffic experts also engage in the time-honoured practice of pretending to be able to see deep into the distant future, projecting anticipated traffic volumes 10 years down the road and trucking figures into the 2050s. Similar seers in 1991 would have had to anticipate the emergence of Tesla founder Elon Musk and Amazon creator Jeff Bezos to appreciate the impact their respective empires would have on living, shopping and traffic patterns 30 years ahead, not to mention the onset of a pandemic that, coupled with technology advances, would radically alter the proclivity to work from home. But don't expect that to stop today's gurus from trying.

Why would federal authorities put so much effort into a bridge for dirty old cars when we all know public transit is the future? It could be that the city's transit record is such a litany of woes that the province launched a public inquiry into a \$2-billion light-rail line that has seen five derailments in its first two years. In a particularly gruelling week last winter the city transit authority noted its trains appeared to have difficulties dealing with snow, a weather feature most residents of Ottawa know to be common.

If there's any reassurance for those who worry any time Ottawa reaches for its wallet, it's that the capital's many layers of officialdom are nowhere near actually making a decision. According to CTV News, the NCC is now beaver away at a draft plan that will present "a blueprint for collaboration with partnering agencies to establish a shared long-term vision and strategies for interprovincial transport of people and goods" and will involve "short-term strategies, medium-term strategies for shifting interprovincial travel behaviour and long-term strategies."

Good for them. That should keep them busy for a while. The bureaucrats have to be paid anyway, and even at Ottawa wages they're probably cheaper than a bridge.

National Post [Twitter.com/KellyMcParland](https://twitter.com/KellyMcParland) !@COPYRIGHT=© 2022 Postmedia Network Inc. All rights reserved.

Graphic

Ashley Fraser, Postmedia News Files; The Macdonald-Cartier Bridge is one of five between Ottawa and Gatineau. A possible sixth structure, which would cost much more than \$1 billion, has been the subject of ongoing debate and many studies.;

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Document-Type: News

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: NEGATIVE PERSONAL NEWS (89%); COMMUTING (88%); CIVIL SERVICES (78%); GOVERNMENT & PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION (78%); PUBLIC OFFICIALS (78%); NEGATIVE NEWS (77%); POLLUTION & ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS (77%); CLIMATE CHANGE (76%); FEDERAL INVESTIGATIONS (75%); INVESTIGATIONS (75%); CABINET OFFICES (68%); GOVERNMENT ADVISORS & MINISTERS (68%); RURAL COMMUNITIES (65%); someone,never,experienced,privilege,living,working (%)

Industry: HEAVY & CIVIL CONSTRUCTION (90%); TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE (90%); VEHICLE TRAFFIC (90%); BUDGETS (78%); BRIDGE CONSTRUCTION (72%); BRIDGES & TUNNELS (60%)

Geographic: OTTAWA, ON, CANADA (95%); TORONTO, ON, CANADA (79%); ONTARIO, CANADA (90%); CANADA (94%)

Load-Date: January 4, 2022